What have we lost?

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Abstract.

The concept of digital therapeutics is becoming increasingly popular. At the end of 2019, NHS England announced that over 300,000 patients were using some form of digital therapy, ranging from CBT and psychoeducation to counselling and psychotherapy. With the advent of the COVID-19 crisis the numbers are now far higher, with most therapists expected, even required, to offer their services via online platforms such as Zoom or Skype. But in the rush to capitalise on the convenience and accessibility of online therapy, it seems as if something, somewhere, has gone missing. In this paper, I will try to characterise and articulate the sense of loss that frequently attends online work, drawing on the work of Freud and the German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin.

The Machine Stops

E. M. Forster's dystopian novella *The Machine Stops* opens with a young man speaking to his mother through a device rather like a modern-day computer. Mother and son live on different sides of the planet, but they can each see an image of each other in a round plate before them and their voices can be heard in real time. The young man is in a state of some distress. He wants to see his mother in person; he wants to speak to her '*not through the wearisome Machine'*. '*The Machine is much',* he says*, 'but it is not everything. I see something like you in this plate, but I do not see you. I hear something like you through this telephone, but I do not hear you. That is why I want you to come. Pay me a visit, so that we can meet face to face, and talk about the hopes that are in my mind.'* His mother, '*vaguely shocked'*, reminds him that live meetings between people are not permitted; interaction can only take place via the machine. Her son, she thinks, looks sad when he hears this but '[*s]he could not be sure',* writes Forster*, 'for the Machine did not transmit nuances of expression. It only gave a general idea of people — an idea that was good enough for all practical purposes…The imponderable bloom, declared by a discredited philosophy to be the actual essence of intercourse, was rightly ignored by the Machine, just as the imponderable bloom of the grape was ignored by the manufacturers of artificial fruit. Something "good enough" had long since been accepted by our race'.*

The idea of an '*imponderable bloom'* that is ignored by the Machine is surely something that resonates deeply for us all today. For as we negotiate the current coronavirus crisis, we have found ourselves living in a world that bears a remarkable resemblance to Forster's dystopian vision. Therapists and other mental health practitioners have been forced online and there has been something of a rush to provide and develop online services for all those who need it during the pandemic. Of course, we have become increasingly familiar with the idea of digital therapeutics. At the end of last year, the NHS announced that over 300,000 patients in the UK were now using some form of digital therapy, ranging from CBT and psychoeducation to counselling, all involving various forms of online and video conferencing platforms. The numbers today are far higher; and in the context of COVID-19, all of us are now expected, even required, to offer our services via Skype, Zoom, DoxyMe or even WatsApp. Given the uncertainty about the likely trajectory of the pandemic,

it seems likely that our online work will only increase. Indeed, NHS England is currently working with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) to assess 14 different digital therapy products for future use in mental health services. In the face of this rapid development and eager expansion of online platforms, it is far from clear what the future holds for face-to-face therapy.

In this paper, I want to think of the changes that are occurring in the therapeutic world as an example or microcosm of the changes that are currently affecting all practitioners who work with people, including those who work in teams and organisations. Let me say from the outset that I have no doubt that for many, online work is quicker, more convenient, more flexible and, above all these days, more accessible. It has demonstrated enormous advantages during a period of lockdown where we have been able to continue working with those we would not otherwise be able to help. But given the abundant opportunities for online work and the rising numbers of clients clamouring for online therapeutic services, perhaps it is all the more puzzling when we find ourselves feeling that something, somewhere, has gone missing. Indeed, in the torrent of online communication it seems as if what Forster calls an *'imponderable bloom'* might be in danger of disappearing altogether. The *'imponderable'* of course is exactly that. It is something unfathomable, enigmatic; something that is difficult, if not impossible, to clearly define. We catch glimpses of it, perhaps, in the feelings of frustration and sadness that many practitioners seem to be experiencing at this time. Some of my colleagues and supervisees report feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, even resentful when faced with an unrelenting succession of virtual clients; a few have talked about quitting altogether. Clients too, although clearly relieved at the availability of online work, frequently express painful feelings of bewilderment and anxiety such as: *'My sessions aren't the same any more'*; *'I know you're there, but I don't feel you in the same way'*; or even, in one particularly poignant moment, *'where are you'*? This particular client reached forward and placed the palm of her hand against her computer screen and asked me to put my hand against the screen too so that our hands were palm to palm. I found her attempt to touch my hand, to feel my physical presence through the screen, unbearably moving.

We feel the loss of something, but it is difficult to know exactly what has gone astray. Freud tells us these feelings are characteristic of melancholia, something he discusses in his paper *Mourning and Melancholia* which was written in 1917 against the backdrop of the First World War. Freud sees mourning as a normal response to loss and identifies melancholia as a failed or pathological attempt at mourning. The mourner, he suggests, is aware or conscious of what has been lost and recognises the need to let go of the lost object. The melancholic, on the other hand, is unable to account for his feelings of sadness. '[O]*ne cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost',* says Freud*, 'and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either'* (p. 245). Instead of withdrawing libido from the lost object as in mourning, Freud tells us, the melancholic has withdrawn the lost object into himself where it is incorporated as a means of magically retaining it. The identification of the ego with the lost object thus ensures that the loss is not eradicated, but continues its existence as an inner presence, a hidden, ungrievable loss that has been withdrawn from consciousness. Indeed, by identifying so fully with the lost object, the melancholic fails to recognise that anything has been lost at all.

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.

I think we too are in danger of failing to recognise that we have lost something in the welter of online services and the plethora of digital technologies that are currently available. I want to try to develop my thinking here with reference to the work of Walter Benjamin, the German cultural critic, philosopher and essayist. In his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin (1936) discusses the shift in perception that emerged after the advent of film, photography and radio in the twentieth century. He argues that the capacity for easy production and transport of multiple prints of an image via mechanical technologies diminishes or even destroys what he calls the 'aura' that once belonged to traditional forms of art. Unlike the postcard or the photograph, the original work of art had a unique physical presence in space and time, an 'aura' or presence signalling its origins in ritual and religion. It is this unique presence that evokes an attitude of reverence, even awe, in the viewer.

Although we might have an intuitive grasp of what is meant by aura, it is a difficult word to define. Benjamin (1936) tells us it is constituted by a certain quality of distance or remoteness. '*What is aura, actually?*' he asks*. 'A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance of semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be. While resting on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch which casts its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance – this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch'* (SW 2:518-9). The example of aura in nature is used here to illuminate something about aura in art; but the definition of aura as a '*strange weave of space and time*' suggests that it is not so much concerned with 'what' we see or the 'content' of our experience, but rather with the very structure or form of the experience itself. Indeed, what makes auratic experience distinct from other forms of experience is that it announces a different order of reality. In its '*strange weave of space and time*', we become so absorbed in the object of our interest that the unique '*moment or the hour*' becomes identified with the object of our interest and included within our reverie. But just as we are drawn so close to the object as to become immersed within in its temporal orbit, so too we are kept apart from the object by a *'unique appearance of semblance of distance'*. The object seems paradoxically unapproachable despite our utter absorption within it. In this heightened state of perception, Benjamin seems to be saying that we come up against the limits of what we can know of the object. We discern its inherent opacity, its enigmatic core; we are party to an inner, private experience of the object that transcends our habitual ways of understanding and responding to the world.

It might seem as if Benjamin's main interest lies in uncovering the links between aesthetic perception, artistic creation and the techniques of production and reproduction of artworks. But his idea of 'aura' is rather more politically charged than this. Writing in the 1930s, and critical of the emergence of Fascism in Europe, Benjamin saw aura as a kind of 'cult value' that attached to objects that were owned and controlled by the elite. In this way, aura served to maintain the authority of particular cultural objects and precluded a more democratic political consciousness. The introduction of new reproductive technologies not only brought art to the masses, it inevitably sponsored a decline in aura that weakened the authority of the ruling elite. A new social consciousness went hand in hand with the liberation of art for political purposes and emancipatory ends.

Today, of course, we can see how the colossal acceleration in new forms of reproductive technology speaks to precisely the kind of change in consciousness that Benjamin thought contributed to the waning of aura. *'The social basis of the aura's present decay',* he suggests, *'rests on two circumstances [...]Namely: the desire of the present-day masses to 'get closer' to things [...] and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating [it] as a reproduction'* (SW 4:255-6). These days we are all aware how contemporary digital technologies have changed the way we participate in the world. Thanks to Facebook, YouTube, Skype, Zoom, Instagram, Snapchat and selfies, we can summon and reproduce literally millions of images by touching, swiping, saving and liking one minute and by deleting them the next. We can instantaneously place a live image of ourselves in multiple, simultaneous locations that our physical, embodied selves cannot possibly reach. We are available to everyone, everywhere, all at the same time, all at the click of a button. This capacity to distribute objects and ourselves to multiple sites and locations certainly brings us closer to other people: *'A cathedral quits its site',* says Benjamin (1936)*, 'to find a welcome in the studio of an art lover; a choral work performed in a hall or in the open air can be heard in a room'* (p. 252). But this very proximity, he suggests, *'extracts sameness from what is unique'.* It serves to collapse the sense of distance that is crucial for the maintenance of aura.

Aura and online therapy

I wonder if something similar is taking place in our online work? I recently had the rather disconcerting experience of working with a client who, during her online session conducted via mobile phone, suddenly picked me up and transported me to her kitchen. I was carefully placed on the kitchen counter to provide therapy while she started to cook the evening meal. In this rather bizarre situation, I had clearly quit, not just a physical site, but a psychological one as well. At the time, I felt angry, baffled and helpless, a countertransferential response that made it difficult to understand exactly what was happening. Subsequently, I have thought of my discomfort as a response to a particular way of relating that has become normalised as a consequence of digital technologies. Benjamin offers us a useful way of thinking about this. He compares how a painter and a cameraman each go about creating images, using the analogy of a how a magician and a surgeon each go about the work of healing. The magician, suggests Benjamin (1936), heals someone by a 'laying on of hands' that respects the natural distance between himself and his subject. The surgeon however, does the reverse; he heals someone by cutting into his flesh, an operation that significantly disregards the distance between himself and his subject. '*In short'*, he writes, *'the surgeon abstains at the crucial moment from facing his invalid person-to-person, invading him surgically instead'* (p. 248). Benjamin's striking image here offers us a way of thinking about how aura might carry certain implications for how we relate to one another. For '*Magician and surgeon',* he writes*, 'act like painter and cameraman. The painter, while working, observes a natural distance from the subject; the cameraman, on the other hand, penetrates deep into the subject's tissue. The images they both come up with are enormously different'* (p. 248). This difference is precisely what is important here for Benjamin. What is at stake is not whether the *object* - the painting, the photograph or anything else - possesses aura; but rather whether we ourselves are capable of a *particular mode of experiencing*; one that is able to perceive the uniqueness and singularity of the object; one that is capable of facing someone 'person-to-person'. We might say that on the kitchen counter, I had stopped being a therapist or even a person; I had become an object of convenience.

Even as Benjamin welcomes the decline of aura and the liberation of art for radical, political purposes, he also mourns its fading as something that has implications for the way we relate to one another. His evident ambivalence here speaks to us as practitioners who may be equally conflicted about the value of working online. Indeed, I want to suggest that this very conflict indexes some of the ethical issues at stake for us. For if new forms of technology once liberated art from the shackles of tradition, making it accessible to the masses and available for new kinds of political engagement, then online platforms such as Skype and Zoom can similarly be thought of as liberating therapy from its elitist traditions and associations. In this mode, online therapy can be seen to offer a new, progressive way for us to relate to one another; one that no longer needs to conform to the authoritarian rules laid down by history and precedent; one that is no longer constrained by the boundaries of time and place. We can jettison the restrictions of the therapeutic frame; we can throw our couches away. Digital therapy is therapy that's available to all, anytime, anywhere. Indeed, state-sponsored mental health services increasingly promise not simply 'improved access' to psychological therapy but rather mass access: the kind that inevitably entails significant changes to the way we think about and conduct therapeutic relationships.

But if, as Benjamin suggests, the very capacity of online therapy to *'get closer'* to people forecloses the possibility of aura, then perhaps the traditions and rituals associated with face-to-face therapy can be seen as a way of deliberately cultivating something that is akin to aura. This is most evident in forms of therapy that are predicated on a certain *'semblance of distance'*. Psychoanalysis is an obvious example, but I think it occurs to some degree in most if not all forms of in-depth and insight-oriented therapies. The question for us to think about here is whether the maintenance of an appearance of distance, as in face-to-face therapy, is merely a form of mystique promoted in order to keep us in the grip of an elite professional group; or whether this kind of distance is somehow integral to the entire notion of therapeutic work itself. Certainly, in psychoanalytic work, the physical setting of therapy, the constancy of the frame and the analyst's own qualities of anonymity and abstinence are all seen as central to providing a safe space where the patient's unconscious material can be given priority. These features of face-to-face work are all significant ways in which a respect for the patient's own distance from himself, his opacity or 'otherness', is acknowledged, cultivated and sustained. Freud of course came to see this otherness as constitutive of our primary relationality. The residue of the lost, loved other within is not only the basis of melancholia; it is the basis of an alterity that beats at the heart of the ego itself. Maintaining *'a semblance of distance'*, no matter how *close* the other may be, would seem then to signify respect for this alterity, and for a particular mode of experiencing that is required in order to perceive it.

By contrast, online therapy aims to cultivate and sustain a semblance of *proximity*, no matter how *far away* the other may be. This means that however good the technology, no matter how sharp the picture or fast the broadband, our mode of experiencing will necessarily be one in which that *'semblance of distance'* is deliberately minimised. Online work takes what is other or unapproachable and insists on bringing it up as close as possible. But it seems the price we pay for this will be a reduction in our ability to register alterity, to perceive the other's distance from us. Perhaps this is how technology acts to alter not only our therapeutic sensibilities, but the very ontology of how we relate to each other. We might say that in face-to-face work, the patient's embodied, physical presence denotes an otherness that overflows or exceeds the bounds of the person who is sitting before us. In online work, the image of the patient on our computer screen

denotes an absence of alterity that diminishes or lessens the actual person with whom we are working.

In a world that promises, even mandates instant communication, it has become increasingly difficult to remember, retain and respect that *'semblance of distance'* necessary for us to sustain an awareness of otherness. Perhaps the loss of aura, like Forster's *'imponderable bloom',* has itself gone astray: swept aside by the rapid proliferation of digital forms of therapy, their dissociation from the fabric of history and tradition, and the promise and plenitude of something that is available to anyone, anytime, anywhere. Indeed, we might see in this endless accessibility a manic attempt to defray the very loss of aura on which virtual forms of therapy are founded. But here's the paradox. Even as online therapy acts to dissolve the aura of the face-to-face meeting, it simultaneously elicits a quest for presence and immediacy. The glut of online communication seems only to increase our appetite for engaging with the physical. It is almost as if our new digital technologies retroactively sponsor a feeling of loss we didn't know we felt; a desire to recover something whose loss we can only construct after the event of its passing. In a culture saturated with reproductive digital technologies privileging proximity and sameness over distance and difference, perhaps it is only now that we can sense the loss of aura, the decay of our capacity to acknowledge, experience and respect the enigmatic alterity of the other: the aura of a shared, embodied, physical presence.

In today's world, we tend to think of loss as something we need to get over. Often we are told we should be getting on with life, with new pursuits, new relationships, and new ways of doing things. Indeed, as the move to digital platforms continues apace in the public sector, there are many who will claim that any reduction in the availability of face-to-face therapy will be more than compensated for by the benefits of an exponential increase in access to its virtual equivalent. Surely, then, it is only sensible to embrace the opportunities afforded by online work, particularly as the current need for therapy and other kinds of helping work is so urgent.

I'm not so sure. I think it may be important to stay with and think about what we are losing in the rush for digital forms of therapy. This is not so much a matter of nostalgically thinking back to the good old days before online therapy; nor of desperately trying to revive outmoded forms of practice that in any case needed careful rethinking in the light of contemporary concerns. We must stay with the feeling of loss if we are not to *lose the loss itself*, if we are not to lose what is 'in' the loss. I'm sure I'm not alone in feeling acutely the loss of my clients' physical presence: the impact of their voices, their faces, their body language, even their smell. I feel the loss of the fullness and nuance of non-verbal communication; I feel the loss of silence and stillness in the work. Above all, I feel the loss of a way of relating that cultivates a *'semblance of distance'*, a sensitivity to otherness.

Conclusion

The extent to which we feel the loss of these things is a measure of their value. Both Benjamin and Freud remind us there is meaning in loss, in that which always remains at a distance and can never be retrieved. Both are interested in how thought, or consciousness, arises from loss; and how loss becomes the condition of a new kind of agency, one that is founded upon a past whose traces continue to animate the present. Both, in different ways, are concerned with how we can redeem loss, not by trying to bring something back or reversing what has happened, but rather by articulating and presenting the loss as fully as possible. For both, the expression of loss is productive of new meanings and new possibilities.

It is not yet clear, of course, what new possibilities will emerge as a consequence of the COVID-19 crisis and the associated acceleration of digital technologies. But one thing is for sure. We can see significant tensions building between a vastly expanded digital sector that promises therapy for all on the one hand and an increasingly hierarchical distribution of mental health services on the other. A disparity is developing: those who will have access to the 'presence' of a practitioner and those whose experience will be mediated by technology. Many of course will accept the latter as '*good enough for all practical purposes*.' As Forster reminds us, rather dryly, *'something "good enough" had long since been accepted by our race'.*

One problem is that the arrival and proliferation of technology in our neoliberal market for care has changed the parameters of our social consciousness. Our horizons have already been set, shaped in such a way as to position us as consumers ready and willing to accept forms of therapy that are convenient to the needs of the current political system. Perhaps it is all the more urgent then to think about the consequences to us of the widespread availability of therapies that are predicated on a diminution of otherness: that rule out in advance that '*strange weave of space and time'* on which aura depends; and that preclude the '*imponderable bloom'* of the face-to-face encounter.

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